The Devil You Know

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/8718427.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Gravity Falls
Relationship:	Bill Cipher/Stanford Pines/Stanley Pines
Characters:	Bill Cipher, The Author | Original Stanford Pines, Grunkle Stan | Stanley "Stanford" Pines
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Role Reversal, Action, Other Additional Tags to Be Added, Attempted Rape/Non-Con, Mind Manipulation
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2016-12-01 Updated: 2017-03-14 Words: 11,746 Chapters: 7/?

The Devil You Know

by orphan_account

Summary

Bill wants out of the Nightmare Realm, Stan wants out from under Bill's thumb, and Ford wants what he's always wanted – to understand. All things, however, come at a price. (An AU where Stan ended up in Gravity Falls before Ford.)

Notes

This fic is going to be dark, and not everything will be tagged - feel free to ask if you have any questions about upsetting content!

Chapter 1

Stan drives.

It's not that he's stupid enough to think that Bill won't know where he is or what he's doing. He just – needs to drive. He goes faster than he should, hugging the curves of the road, veering sometimes into the opposite lane. Who gives a shit? It's the middle of nowhere in Shitville, Oregon. What's he gonna hit, a deer? Good. Great.

He blinks, and he's where he was two miles ago, parked on the side of the road. It doesn't even faze him. He throws the car into gear and peels into the road. He presses down on the accelerator, taking the curves faster and picking up speed on the downhill slopes until his heart is racing.

He blinks, and he's two miles back. His hands tighten on the wheel. He throws the car into gear.

"Alright, *enough!*"

They're on Bill's turf: Bill is halfway between forms, with his imitation of a human body plus four arms. His tongue lolls out from his stomach. His body is writhing with his anger; he is *furious*.

Good. So is Stan. He summons white-hot fire to surround Bill; the smell of flesh sizzling and popping fills the air. Bill disappears and the fire with it. He reappears over Stan and points a finger at Stan's chest – a light beams a hole through Stan's chest, but Stan has already materialized behind Bill, wearing massive metal gloves embossed in protective sigils. He swings. The crack is loud as lightning. Bill *screeches.*

"You *monster!*" Bill screams. "You're ruining *everything!*" His face is melting from the sigils – when he transforms, they remain, a bright white brand. Stan's gloves disappear – before he can summon anything else, black tentacles lash around him and slam him into the ground. They twine fast and hard around his arms and legs, pinning him. They have sigils of their own on them, glowing an ugly red, and no matter what Stan thinks of, nothing happens. "You pitiful *rube*, did you really think you were going to get *away* with this? Did you forget I'm *inside your mind?*"

Stan, panting hard, grins at Bill. "What," he says, "can't take a little competition, Cipher?"

Bill's tentacles tighten, squeezing the air out of Stan. "Oh, you arrogant little meat bag." His voice has turned sweet. Stan pushes down a spike of fear. "You really don't get it. I own you. I own every thought…" His face clears of color, replaced by an old, old memory, Ford looking up at him, mouth open – Stan shuts his eyes, but he still *sees* it, can still see Bill. "Every desire…" The image changes, Stan suspended and filled, come dripping from him. "Every 'trick' you're thinking of pulling on me. Give up."

A banging sound suddenly fills the landscape. Bill freezes. “What is that?” It keeps going, louder and louder, like gunshots. “Who – ”

Stan wakes up in his living room’s chair. He immediately gropes in his pockets for his marker – *c'mon, c'mon* – and begins to scrawl sigils on his arms, ugly scribbly things that he prays will work. The person knocking on the door bangs again, and calls out: “Stanley, I know you’re home!”

Stan freezes. There’s no way. *Ford.*

What the *fuck* is Ford doing here, *now of all times?* Stanley is going to kill him. He’s going to *fucking kill him,* he thinks, stomping to the door. He throws it open, takes a good look at his good-for-nothing, too-little-too-late brother, and –

– and he can’t help it. He grabs Ford by the coat and yanks him into a fierce hug. “Oh, you *idiot,*” he says.

The angry rev of a car engine echoes down the road. Stan looks up. Ford is tugging awkwardly at Stan, trying to get him to let go. “Stanley, I don’t know – ”

Stan throws him into the house and slams the door shut. He presses against the door and peers through the peephole. *Please be me, please be me, please be me,* he thinks, snatching a pistol out of his waistband. Ford yelps and stumbles further into the living room. “Get down,” he says. “Stay quiet.”

“*Is that a gun?* Stanley, what the *hell* have you gotten yourself into? What are you getting *me into?* I knew I shouldn’t have come out here, I *knew* it, yet I – ”

“*Shut up.*” The car practically flies up Stanley’s drive and skids to a stop. The driver’s door opens. It’s Corduroy. “Shit!” Corduroy – no, Stan knows better, Bill – pauses in the yard, studying the extra car. He shakes his head, shrugs it off, and heads for the house, not quite strident, his feet catching on the stairs. Stan’s mind is racing. At least Ford shut up, for now.

Bill bangs on his door. “Let me in, Bruiser! We oughta talk this out, don’t you think? I know you’re there.”

Stan makes sure the bolts are turned, then backs away from the door, quiet as can be. He stops next to Ford, who leans away from Stan, like he can’t even stand to touch him. “Tell me what’s going on,” Ford hisses under his breath. “Who is that? Does he want to kill you?”

Stan shakes his head and points toward the stairs. Bill bangs again. “Come out, my little poker chip! My big bruiser! My medium-sized piece of cake! C'mon, you know you can’t hide in there forever. I know how to pick locks. Remember? And even if I can’t get inside your *mind,* I can get inside plenty of *other things.*"

Ford doesn’t move except to hold both hands up in a gesture that says, *seriously?* Stan shakes his head, grabs Ford’s coat, and drags him toward the stairs. "I’ll explain later,” he mouths. Hopefully.

Once they hit the second floor, Stan runs, Ford hot on his heels. He clambers up the stairs to the attic, still pulling Ford after him. It's only in the attic that he lets go. He yanks his makeshift curtains over the window, takes a deep breath, and then turns to face Ford.

Ford, however, is staring at Stanley #4, who is frozen in the middle of shuffling a deck of cards. Stanley #3 is asleep, curled up on his makeshift bed on the floor. "Okay," Stan says, "everybody just stay calm."

Ford sits down. Outside, a car horn starts to blare. Stanley #3 shifts in his sleep and sniffs. "Stay calm," Ford repeats in a flat voice.

"Oh, boy." Stanley #4 palms the deck of cards.

"Stay calm," Ford says again, his voice an octave higher.

"Think Bill's gonna inhabit Tres over here?" Stan #4 asks Stan, tossing a thumb his way.

"Doubt it," Stan says, grimly.

"*Stanley.*"

Both Stans turn to look at Ford, then each other, sharing the exact same cringing expression. Stan #4 finally shrugs and gestures to Stan. "Don't look at me," he says. "You're the original."

"Okay," Stan says, going to Ford and squatting in front of him. "You know all those letters of mine you've been ignoring?"

"Yes," Ford says. Stan doesn't like how calm his voice is when his expression is slightly unhinged.

"Yeah. Well. It's a long story, okay? These losers are copies of me. I made them 'cause I'm trying to throw Mr. Beeps-a-lot out there off his game. He's…" Stan ruffles a hand through his hair. How the hell do you explain Bill to Ford? How the hell do you explain *any* of this? "He's a demon, or something."

Stanley #3 starts to murmur in his sleep; both Stans jump and seem to forget Ford exists for nearly thirty seconds. Ford slowly puts his hands on the side of his head.

Stan clears his throat. "Anyway," he says. "He can really only mess with us in our heads. Right? But he *also* has a hard time telling us apart. Humans, I mean. These guys have the same brain as me, though. Same dreams, same thoughts, same everything. You following?"

"You're using…" Ford looks between the three Stans. He is so pale that Stan wonders if he's going to pass out. "Wh-what are they, clones? Of yourself…to confuse a demon. Into doing *what?*"

"Well, I've got this theory," Stan says. "He can only be in one brain at a time, see, and that's

when he's at his most vulnerable. You can hurt him in there, if you know what you're doing. So I thought: What if you could *kill* him in there?"

"Except," Stan #4 says, apparently unable to resist, "you *can't* kill him in the Mindscape. Or anyway, I can't."

"Right," Stan says. "But I got to thinking. If he's trapped himself in someone's brain by possessing them, what if – "

Stan #3 whimpers. It's a noise they shouldn't be able to hear, not with the noise of the car horn. But the car, Stan realizes, is silent.

"Shit," Stan #4 says. "He's in there."

Stan shifts. "Maybe." He tightens his grip on the gun. They wait. Even Ford stays silent, though Stan knows it's gotta be killing him.

Stanley #3 sits, groggily rubbing at his eyes. Stan stands and aims the gun at the center of his forehead.

"I gotta give it to you," Bill says, "you're smarter than you look. But you're not *that* smart." Stan fires – Stanley #3's head snaps back, a burst of ink exploding on the wall. He disintegrates. No one moves. No one makes a sound.

"Is…that it?" Ford says.

"You tell me," Stan #4 says.

The house turns gray; Stanley #4 stands, his eyes yellow, pupils black. Stan points the gun at him, but Bill lifts a hand and the gun comes apart, the pieces hovering in the air between them. Stan #4 starts to expand, his skin wrinkling, going black with running ink until only Bill is left.

"Hiya, Stanford," Bill says. "Welcome to Gravity Falls!"

Stan lunges toward Ford, speaking in a rush: "Whatever-he-says-don't – " The blanket that served as the curtains glows with symbols and flies across the room, catching Stan and knocking him over. His own shirt hitches up and bunches in his mouth, gagging him.

"Stanley!"

Bill pops between them, hands up in a steadying gesture. "Okay, so I know how this looks. Your brother here is going to tell you a lot of 'horrible things' I've done." He hovers closer; Stan thrashes and shouts muffled curses through his shirt. "I just want you to keep two things in mind. Listen closely, IQ. Are you listening?

"One: Your brother is too simple-minded to comprehend the places I'm taking this world. Two: You're gonna change the world, Stanford Pines, if you're not afraid to let yourself. A

mind like yours shows up in your dimension only once in a thousand years. And I…" Bill touches the tip of his finger to Ford's forehead. "…can make you great."

He blinks away from Ford and reappears over Stan. Stan seethes, so angry that he's amazed his body can contain it all. *Not my brother,* he thinks. *Don't you fucking touch him.* Bill hovers a moment, admiring his handiwork. Of course he's *reveling* in this. He lifts his hand and snaps. The blanket falls away.

"I'll see you around, Sixer!" he says, cheery as ever, and disappears in a flash of light.

Color returns to the house. Stan curses and slams his fist onto the floor, then again, and again, until he's screaming.

Ford touches his shoulder. It's enough to startle Stan out of his anger.

"I'm sorry," Stan says, sitting up. "Ford, you need to get outta here. Now. I mean it – *right now.* I almost had him this time, I can do this on my own, I never shoulda tried to – "

"Shut the fuck up, Stanley." Stan's mouth snaps shut. Ford shifts onto his knees; his brow is furrowed. His focus is so intense that he almost looks angry – and hell, Stan wouldn't blame him if he is. "You are going to tell me everything. Right now."

Stan takes a slow, deep breath. It shakes out of him. He rubs his forehead. "…you're not gonna like it."

Chapter 2

He starts as close to the beginning as he's comfortable with, which makes it sound like he just sort of appeared in Gravity Falls by chance. That is almost the truth, in that his pen happened to jab Oregon on his road atlas and his car ran out of gas six miles outside of town. Everyone liked him right away, he says. No, really. Larry, down at the gas station, offered Stan a job pumping gas, and he was able to afford to rent a room in this place from the original owner. He took care of her selflessly in her dying days, and she had no family to speak of, so when she passed (gracefully, in her sleep), he inherited her house. (Ford never thinks to ask for a name, which is good. That's always the hardest part of improv.)

He found a cave when going for a walk one day and, without knowing quite why, decided to explore it. He tells Ford about the strange prickling at the back of Stan's neck the second he descended into the cave. When he tries to describe the cave paintings, Ford surprises him by stopping him, grabbing a piece of paper, and grilling Stan. "What did they look like? Can you recreate them?"

They spend almost a quarter of an hour on that, until Stan finally gives up and threatens to burn the whole thing. "I'm trying to to tell my story here, alright? I can show you the stupid cave later."

So: Stan found a cave, and left again without worrying about it. But his mind kept wandering back to it in his downtime. He even started to dream about its dark corridors and the alien shapes on the wall. Finally, he couldn't take it anymore – his, uh, scientific curiosity insisted that he follow through and return to the cave. He went back – of his own volition, of course. Of course.

(So: Stan runs for his life – *how did they find him? How?* – and he slips on the wet leaves on the forest floor. Fucks up his hands catching his fall. When he looks up, he spots the entrance to a cave. He knows that cave. He's stashed goods in there before.

"I'm gonna *tear you apart,* Forrester!"

Stan scrambles for the entrance.)

This time, at the sight of the paintings, he couldn't ignore the pull of them. He sat for a long time, puzzling over them. A haze came over him, almost meditative, almost calming. Not quite. He didn't know how many hours he lost down there. Then, as if dreaming, he stood and began to read the incantation on the wall.

The world went gray, and Stanley Pines met Bill Cipher for the first time.

"What did he say?" Ford interrupts. He's sitting very close to Stan, excited energy coming off him in waves.

"I was gonna skip that part," Stan says, rolling his eyes. Ford punches his arm. Stan has to suppress a giddy laugh. *Ford just punched his arm.*

“I mean, tell me as accurately as you can.”

Stan clears his throat. “Well."

Bill Cipher blinked into existence, huge and yellow and unholy. Stan knew the moment he saw him that this had been a mistake. "Get lost, demon!” he shouted, but Bill merely laughed and grew until he filled the whole cave.

“You’ve committed a grave mistake! You’re mine, now, human!” he roared.

And that was that – he disappeared, the cave returned to normal, and Stan found himself with the worst roommate ever in his mind. Bill began to torment him, day and night, demanding that Stan help him find artifacts and making him do things like draw summoning circles in chicken blood on his kitchen floor. (This is true. It took Stan half a day to clean it.) Stan, in his panic, started to send letters to Ford, asking him to come help, because if anyone could, his nerd brother could. Oh, and he found this crazy-ass copier that could make clones of himself. Then Ford showed up.

“And here we are,” Stan finishes with a shrug.

(“Well, well, well, aren't *you* in a pickle!”

“Wh – who – what *are* you?”

“I’m Bill Cipher! And you’re Stanley Pines. Nice to meet you! Not quite how I was envisioning it, but hey, I can work with this!”

In the distance, dogs howl for blood. Faint, so faint. Just a leftover echo in his mind. Stan is still panting hard; warm blood trickles down his upper lip. He licks it away. “You can help me?”

“Of course I can! But you of all people should know…“ He is inches from Stan’s face, suddenly, his eye a violent blue. "You don’t get something for nothing!” The dogs flash across Bill’s eye – the men with guns and crowbars –

– and what else does Stan have? Stan swallows, straightens his back, and strikes a deal.)

Ford stands and starts to pace, his hand on his chin. Stan watches him, waiting patiently for Ford to start pelting him with questions. The longer he watches, however, the more his mood sours, resentment seeping into him. He leans back and rests an arm on the back of his chair. When Ford finally pivots toward him, a question on his tongue, he stops at the sight of him. Ford scowls.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“How long has it been?” Stan asks.

“What?” It’s almost funny, watching Ford’s train of thought crash and burn.

“Since my first postcard."

Ford stares at him. "Are you serious right now?"

Stan gets to his feet and folds his arms across his chest. "Yeah. Tell me. How long has it been? Do you even know?"

"I – I don't know, a couple of months? Stanley, that is not the issue here. You have a serious problem on your hands." When Stan only glares at him in response, Ford's anger flares. "You're lucky I came *at all,* after what you did to me! You can't seriously be mad that I didn't come *soon enough.*"

Stan erupts. "If you sent me just *one thing* in the mail saying you needed my help, I'd come! I'd come right away, even after what *you* did to *me!*"

"What I did? You ruined your *own* future, Stanley, *and mine!*"

Stan can't listen to this anymore. He lunges, tackling Ford. They crash to the ground; Ford shouts in pain, then swings. "It was *a mistake!*" Stan shouts, his fist clipping Ford's jaw. Ford's glasses fly off his face and skitter across the floor. Ford socks Stan in the stomach and manages to dislodge him – Stan crashes into the coffee table. Ford launches at him and they grapple again, rolling along the floor, knocking into furniture.

"You – did it – on – *purpose!"* Ford screams. "You know you did! Don't *lie to me!*"

Stan manages to get a fistful of Ford's hair and yanks him around, using it to slam Ford face-down on the floor. Ford writhes, seething. "I *needed you!*" Stan shouts, his voice breaking. "This fucker has been trying to kill me and *I needed you* and you – and you didn't *care.*" His throat is constricted, so tight he can barely breathe. His eyes are hot. Ford has gone very still on the floor.

"Stanley," he says, softly. "Stanley, I…I didn't know it was this serious. Your letters – "

Stan gives Ford one last shove into the carpet and stands, walking away. He scrubs at his face, angry at himself – angry for his outburst, angry for his weakness. But it *hurts,* and it's been hurting for weeks.

"Your letters," Ford repeats, steady now, "never said anything about him. I thought you were in debt, or involved in some – some shady business that might get you arrested at worst. Not this."

Push it down, Stan thinks. Let it go. He came. He's here, now. *That's more than you deserve.*

Stan takes a deep breath, lets it out, and turns around. "I know," he says. "I do. I know." Ford is closer than Stan expected. Ford takes the last few steps toward Stan and wraps his arms around him.

"I'm here, now," Ford says, his arms tightening around Stan. "Okay? So let's figure out how to fix this."

Stan clings to Ford like he's the last thing on Earth that matters.

As far as Stan’s concerned, he might be.

Chapter 3

They need a plan.

Step one: They need to eat. Stan does, anyway. Ford follows him into the kitchen, taking in the house with growing alarm. “How rich was that woman, anyway?” he asks, running his finger along the mahogany kitchen table.

“She was loaded,” Stan says. He opens the fridge and rifles through it, then pulls out a carton of eggs, butter, cheese, green onions, and some bacon. “Her family was in the railroad business.” He pulls down two pans, moving with the quick efficiency of a man who knows his stove. Ford sits, perching on the edge of a mahogany chair. “Way I figure, my plan with the paper Stans was pretty good, it just needs some tweaking.”

“I don’t know,” Ford says, drumming his fingers on the table. “It’s awfully morbid, Stan. Do you even know what he wants with you? Has he said?”

Stan doesn’t look back, his shoulders hunching a little. He watches the butter melt in the frying pan. “Like I said, I don’t know. It’s – random. He tells me to find things, or he just wants to spend time in my body.” He slaps a row of bacon in one of the frying pans. “He talks big game about changing the world, but it sounds like bullshit to me. Half the time I come around he’s just been sn – eaking around the forest.” A quiet, but very sudden, panic squeezes Stan’s chest. He is going to have to Ford-proof the fuck out of the house before Ford starts poking around. He glances surreptitiously around the kitchen for anything fishy, but it’s…surprisingly clean, actually, other than a row of empty liquor bottles by the kitchen sink and three different ash trays full of cigarette butts.

“But *how* does he want to change the world?” Ford presses.

“I don’t know, alright? He just likes to go on about how great he is and how angles are the ‘superior geometric configuration.' *I* think he just likes fucking with me.” (Bill inside of him, holding Stan at the back of his mind while he presses the handle of a hairbrush into him; Bill in the Mindscape, stroking Stan’s face and murmuring how good he is, how strong –)

Ford makes a dissatisfied noise, but he doesn’t ask a third time. “Do you know what he is? Where he comes from?”

Stan begins folding the eggs over and pokes at the bacon. “No,” he says. “I mean. Not really? He’s from another dimension. He’s got limits to what he can do here. Like I said, you can only hurt him in dreams.” He cuts the onions in slivers and adds them and the cheese to the eggs. “And he can only hurt us if he possesses us. You saw how that looked – crazy eyes, twitchy, lots of cackling.” He takes down two plates, fills one of them with the eggs and bacon, and sets it down in front of Ford.

“…you actually cooked eggs and bacon,” Ford says, like he hasn’t just watched Stan do it. He takes a bite. “And it's *good.*”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Stan says. “That and pancakes are all I got."

Ford laughs. "I can round us out with a mean grilled cheese,” he says.

Stan sets to work on his eggs and bacon, grinning. He’s never felt this good. He wishes Bill would come back and let him have another go at him in the Mindscape – he could finish it. He’s sure of it.

There’s a knock on the back door – three sharp taps. Ford jumps out of his chair and points his fork at the door. “Easy,” Stan says. “That’s just Twofer."

The door opens and Stan #2 staggers into the kitchen, his suit torn and filthy, his hair wild. "I don’t know what happened; I came to and the car was wrecked and I – Ford?”

“*How many did you make?*” Ford asks.

“Seven,” Stan says. “He’s the only one that’s not dead, though.” He turns to Stan #2. “The plan failed. Sit down. Or drink a glass of water, if you want.”

“It failed? It actually failed?"

"Yep."

Stan #2 says nothing for several minutes. Stan finishes cooking his eggs and bacon, piles it on a plate, and sits down. His clone still hasn’t moved, gazing at nothing. Ford hasn’t touched his food; he can’t seem to take his eyes off of the clone. "Is…” Ford lowers his voice. “Is he going to be okay?”

“They have these, like, existential crises sometimes. He’ll be fine. And if he’s not…” Stan shrugs. “He’s just paper.”

Stan #2 turns to Ford.

Oh, no, Stan thinks, dread dropping like a ton of lead in his stomach. Oh, *fuck no.*

“I’m not just paper,” he says, his voice odd, devoid of emotion. He crosses the room to Ford. “I’m not,” he says again, louder. He reaches for Ford – takes his face – Stan needs water, or orange juice, or *anything,* but there’s nothing, and it’s too late. Stan #2 bends into Ford. He kisses him.

Well, Stan thinks, *I’m dead.*

When Stan #2 pulls back, his face has begun to melt, his lips horribly distorted and black. He goes to the kitchen sink, turns it on, and sticks his head under. He doesn’t scream. He begins to warp, and melt. Then, he is nothing but a puddle of ink on the floor.

The silence stretches. Stan stares at the puddle of ink on the floor as long as he can, because if he looks up and sees ink on Ford’s face, he is going to lose it.

Ford clears his throat. “I, uh.” He stands. “I need to get my things from my car.”

“Yeah,” Stan says, without moving. “Sure.”

Stan finishes his food, then Ford’s, which is lukewarm. He washes the dishes. Then, since he figures he has time, he starts to do some Ford proofing – the kitchen, as he suspected, is not as clean as it looks at first glance. He starts dumping everything in a black garbage bag, not bothering to separate money from trash from drugs from anything else.

He’s moved onto the dining room when the thought occurs to him: This is a really long time for Ford to be gone but to not have left. Stan hasn’t heard the car start. The kiss was bad, but it’s not – not *new*, exactly. Yet Ford’s been gone for more than half an hour.

“God damn it,” he says, and runs for the front door.

Outside, however, Ford is just sort of – sitting on the trunk of his car. He has a suitcase, a briefcase, and an overstuffed backpack sitting by the wheel. His hand covers his mouth. He appears to be deep in thought.

It doesn’t matter. Stan needs to see his eyes.

He jumps off the porch and jogs over to Ford. “Hey! Sixer!"

Ford lifts his head. For a split second, the red light of the sunset catches his glasses, obscuring his eyes. Stan skids to a stop, and the angle of Ford’s glasses change, revealing the whites of his eyes. Human. Ford has wiped most of the ink away from his face, but there is a trace of it on his chin.

"Hey,” Stan says, his voice trailing off.

“No more clones,” Ford says. His voice is flat. He stands and hauls his backpack up on his shoulder.

“Listen,” Stan says.

Ford holds up a hand. “Whatever you’re going to say, I don’t care.” Stan winces. “I take it there’s a room in there I can stay in? And I’ll need somewhere that I can work."

"You’re…staying?”

Ford looks at him like he’s an idiot. “Of course I’m staying,” he says. He grabs his suitcase, struggling with its weight – Stan reaches to take it, and is relieved when Ford lets him. Like taking a suitcase off a guy who’s loaded down is something worth thinking about.

“What about your classes?”

Ford heads for the house, adjusting his backpack as he goes. “What do I need a second PhD for? Bragging rights? This is more important.” He opens the door and steps in, like he owns the place. Stan follows, too relieved at still having his brother around to be bothered by his sudden brusque behavior. Ford sets his briefcase on the couch and turns to Stan. “Now,” he says. “I want you to show me the cave where you met Bill. And your…” He shudders and rubs his mouth with the back of his hand. Stan doesn’t think he knows he’s done it. “Copier.

Have you been keeping a journal about what's been happening? I'd like to read it if you have. The more information that I have, the better equipped we both are to deal with this." He slings his backpack onto the floor with a thunderous noise. How heavy *is* that thing?

"Look, can we slow down for a minute?" Stan says. "I've had a *really* long day and I've been up two nights working already."

Ford laughs. When Stan doesn't laugh with him, his laughter fades, his face sinking into disbelief.

Stan slumps into his chair; admitting his exhaustion has made it flood in him. His body feels heavy, a buzzing in his head. A headache pounds away in his temple, so intense that Stan can't believe he didn't feel it before. "I know how that sounds," he says. He drags a hand over his face. "But Bill…he's not a constant. After an episode like today, he has to go do… whatever it is he does wherever he comes from. Recover. He's not gonna make another move for at least a couple days. He'll keep an *eye* on us, but…we have a buffer."

"How do you know?"

"Because that's what he always does." Stan shrugs. "And I really fucked him up today. Did you see his face?" Stan jabs a thumb at his own cheek. "He doesn't normally have those. If he really…" Stan grimaces and looks away. "If he really wants to bed you, Sixer, he's not gonna do it when he looks like a screw-up."

Ford chokes out a strange laugh and walks away, scrubbing a hand through his hair. "Well, that's comforting."

"Shouldn't be."

Ford walks over to the coffee table, which is still knocked over from their skirmish, and rights it, then sits on the couch. "So, what. You're going to go to sleep, and I'm supposed to just sit around all night, doing nothing?"

"…you can sleep, too, y'know."

Ford waves his hand dismissively. "No, no. I'll keep myself busy. Where are the bedrooms?"

Getting out of the chair is harder than it should be, but Stan nods and drags himself back to his feet. "C'mon," he says. "This way." He grabs Ford's suitcase again and leads Ford up the stairs; on the second landing, he stops, swaying a little. Fuck, he's tired. "My room," he says, pointing. "Bathroom. Closet. Guest room. Or you can sleep in the attic, if you want. The copier's downstairs, if you wanna look at it tonight. Down the hall off the living room."

Ford takes his suitcase from Stan. "Yes, yes. Thank you." He heads for the spare room, then stops short. He turns to look at Stan, his expression soft. "It's…good to see you again," he says. He clears his throat and turns away again. "Get some rest, Stanley."

Stan's chest is so tight it hurts. But he smiles and gives a little salute. "Don't gotta tell me twice," he says.

Once Stan is in the relative safety of his room, he collapses face-first on his bed. Maybe he cries a little, too full of relief and anxiety and exhaustion to worry about the things Bill will say about it in the future. When he's calmed down, his head hurts even worse. He pops a few aspirin and pulls the covers up to his chin.

Ford's footsteps creak through the house. It's a comforting sound, makes him feel like – like he's home. The urge to climb out of bed and follow him hits him, so intensely that he almost throws back the covers. He imagines it instead, Ford dropping his backpack on the floor of the empty room, Ford pacing a circle around the room, investigating. Ford moving down the hallway, his coat flaring out behind him. Ford stopping in front of Stan's room.

Stan slips into sleep, enveloped in warm thoughts.

He doesn't dream.

Later, he will believe that it's because of Ford, those creaking footsteps better than any lullaby, any sigil or magical cast-off he might lay at his door.

(He will be right.)

Chapter 4

Ford paces. He is inundated with the unveiling of the world. His mind is molten, pure potential. He has been waiting for this his whole life – desperate for a sign that there may be a world where he belongs. That he might be already living there.

Here that world is, ripe for the taking, and it's his own brother who pulled the curtains away. Stanley has given Ford his future back.

Why hadn't he come sooner? Ford kicks his bag in frustration and stops, burying both hands in his hair. He takes a deep, steadying breath, sits on the bed, and focuses. *What can I feel, what can I see, what can I smell,* he thinks. The quilt is a little scratchy under the palms of his hands, and its design sends a little jolt through Ford: Yellow triangles, set against a black and red geometric background. It's almost something that could be abstract, perhaps inspired by Islamic art, but Ford doubts it. The rest of the room is sparsely decorated – a painting of a ship at sea on a cloudy day hangs on one wall, and there's some unfinished thing (runes, maybe?) scratched into another wall. A cluster of snow globes stands on top of the dresser. A hunting rifle sits by itself in an umbrella stand in a corner. Four battered cardboard boxes rest by the rifle; Ford can see the edge of an off-white bowling pin through a tear in one of them. The only window in the room is over the length of the bed – it has no curtains, and the only thing Stanford can see out of it is the forest and rolling hills and navy blue sky.

It certainly doesn't seem like the decorations of a sweet old dying woman. Ford pinches the bridge of his nose. The room has the vague smell of cigarettes and sweat. He turns onto his knees on the mattress and struggles with the window. Cracking it open lets in cool air that smells strongly of pine trees and coming rain. Ford sucks it into his lungs gratefully.

All I'm asking for is one chance. Is that so much?

Ford scrambles to the edge of his bed and yanks his backpack over. He takes out a half-empty moleskin, settles against the headboard, and begins to write.

September 2, 1972.

Where to start? I went to see Stanley today, and, as noted, was sure it would be a mistake. It turns out the real mistake has been staying away. Gravity Falls is an insignificant town on its own, but Stanley is involved with a

Stanford can't pick a word. He begins sketching instead, careless with his lines, recreating Bill. When he's finished, he studies the image, brow furrowed.

You know better than anyone what that idiot's like, am I right? He'd do anything to seem more important than he really is.

He begins to sketch Stan, now, taking more care. His face he leaves nondescript, but the rest is deliberate and detailed: Stan's hair, a little longer than it used to be and slicked back; the suit he wore, pinstriped and tailored to fit him; the shoes that shone blackly like they'd just

been shined. The gold cufflinks that glowed. The gold ring on his left hand. The gold chain of a pocket watch looping out of his right pocket. The gold pin in his left lapel of a triangle with a diamond eye.

Ford grimaces and scratches Stan out. He rubs his mouth with the back of his hand and, with a sigh, begins to write again.

...creature of undetermined origin named Bill Cipher. He has the ability to connect to humans through something Stanley calls the Dreamscape. Other abilities: Possession, shape-shifting, dream/thought manipulation?

A wolf howls somewhere deep in the forest. Ford shivers.

You're special, Ford. I don't want to see that sucked down the drain. Do you? Don't answer – just think about it. And remember: When you go, bring a matchbox.

Ford comes to a decision: He can, and should, at least investigate the rest of the house. Stanley mentioned the cloning device on the first floor, which is as good of a place to start as any. He shuts his journal with a snap, stands, and crosses the room to the door.

He steps into his future, his heart hammering with excitement.

Chapter 5

Ford's car is gone. Great.

Stan sits on the front porch, letting the mid-morning sun and a glass of scotch warm him up. It's possible that the whole bit with Ford was some sort of trick by Bill to punish him, but joke's on Bill – if that is the case, then it's better than the real Ford promising to stay and then ditching him in the middle of the night. Stan knocks back the rest of the scotch and yawns. He's still too tired to freak out much over the other possibilities, and tells himself for the hundredth time that Ford's probably just out buying groceries. He wishes Ford would've at least waited until Stan woke up – the thought of Ford spending any money makes his stomach curl.

Stan takes his brass knuckles out of his pocket and plays with them, thinking. The clones are a no-go, but with Ford here, Stan wonders if his original plan just needs to be tweaked. If he can teach Ford how to follow Bill into Stan's' mind, he might be able to figure out how to kill him in there. Ford's smarter than Stan – there's probably something Stan hasn't thought of, some trick to keep Bill trapped long enough to imagine him going straight to hell.

If Ford's still here, a voice in Stan's mind chimes in – Bill's voice, more common every day. In a way, Stan is glad that the self-loathing side of himself has picked up Bill's tone and timbre, because it makes it easier for him to roll his eyes and think back, *Whatever you say, big guy.*

Stan stretches and scratches his stomach. (Where the fuck is Ford? It's almost 11.) The scotch buzzes unpleasantly in his head, a little too reminiscent of his splitting headache last night. The obvious solution is more scotch, but he'd rather Ford not come back and find him in a drunken stupor before noon. (Because Ford is going to come back.) Instead of going for more liquor, Stan slides on his brass knuckles and takes out a cigar. He's about to light it when it hears the distant rumble of a car engine. He leaps to his feet, forgetting the cigar, and jogs out to the yard – then changes his mind, and hurries inside, scrambling to his chair and flipping on the TV.

Outside, the car comes to a stop with a hiss of gravel. He waits, listening hard, his heart pounding. A car door opens, then shuts. Another one opens, then, after a few moments, shuts. He can hear footsteps, and whistling. The door opens, banging into the wall, and relief floods Stan. It's Ford, hauling two stuffed brown bags and…grinning, for some reason. Stan tries to remember if there's a cute girl working at the nearest grocery store. Maybe?

"Ah, Stanley! Good morning." Ford kicks the door shut.

"Mornin'," Stan says, leaning back into his chair nonchalantly. "You got groceries?"

"Sort of!" Ford crosses through the living room, a little pep in his step that Stan is beginning to hate. "I always suspected you'd like soaps in your old age," he adds, before disappearing into the kitchen.

Stan blinks, then looks at the TV for the first time. A woman and her – what, sister? – are getting into a heated, over-acted argument. Stan grumbles to himself and stands, following Ford.

“Anyway,” Ford says, “it’s more accurate to say that I went out and bought supplies.”

“Uh huh,” Stan says, staring at Ford. “Did you get any sleep last night?”

“Hm? No no, I’ve been much too busy for that.” Ford laughs, a slightly manic sound. The hairs on the back of Stan’s neck stand on end. Ford begins to empty the bags – two lengths of rope, a bottle of washer fluid, and a box of kiddy fireworks are just the beginning. As he unpacks, he keeps talking, vibrating with excitement. “I can’t believe this town, Stanley! It’s a dream come true. Last night alone I discovered two unrecorded anomalies, and I – ”

“You went out into the forest?” Stan says.

“Of course!” Ford pivots toward Stanley and grabs his arms. “Why didn’t you *tell* me about this place? If I’d known it was rife with supernatural phenomenon, I would’ve come in a heartbeat!”

Stan being in mortal danger, however, was not a strong enough motivator. That’s nice. Stan takes a step back and shoves his hands in his pockets. “Yeah?”

“Like I was saying,” Ford continues, turning back to the table, “I discovered two unrecorded anomalies, and I really think we can make headway on more before the day is out. I have preliminary blueprints for a device that can help us track down anomalies by picking up their signals, and – ”

“Okay, that’s great,” Stan interrupts, putting a hand on the table and leaning into Ford. “But can we worry about that *after* taking care of Bill?”

Ford’s stare is blank, which should surprise Stan but really, really doesn’t. “Bill?” he repeats.

“Yeah. Small isosceles motherfucker who tried to kill us last night?”

Ford shrugs. “I think he’s equilateral, actually.”

“Not the point.”

“*Did* he try to kill us?” Ford asks, without looking up. “I would give you ‘intimidate,’ or 'control,’ but *kill* is stretching it, Stanley.”

“I’m not hearing this,” Stan says.

Ford sighs and rubs his forehead, then turns to Stan and puts his hands on his shoulders. Stan tries to yank back. His grip is firm, though, and only tightens. “Listen,” Ford says. “I’m not saying he isn’t dangerous. I’m not saying that dealing with him *isn’t* one of my top priorities. But you’re exaggerating what happened last night. Anyway, you said yourself that we have a buffer.”

“A *short one.* I…” Stan starts to pace, scratching a hand through his hair. “Ford, I need to know. Be honest with me. Please.” He stops by the kitchen cabinets, not wanting to be within reach of Ford, not trusting himself to be close to his brother right now. “Did he talk to you last night? Without me there?”

“No,” Ford says, without hesitation. Stan expects – something else, any of his usual tells, a stutter or a twitch or – or anything. “Why would he? You said he can’t do anything for another couple of days.”

He’s lying, Stan thinks. *He has to be.* Or, the more reasonable side of himself suggests, *you’re being paranoid. Bill’s getting to you.* Stan’s throat is tight. He clears it. “Alright,” he says, slowly. “I trust you.”

“And I trust you,” Ford says, so flippantly that it feels like an insult. “Now, are you hungry?” He holds up a pack of bologna. “This should be enough for sandwiches, and then we can get to work.”

*

When Stan starts to smoke, Ford shoots him a disapproving look, so one cigarette turns into a chain-smoking session, until the smoke is so dense in the room it makes Ford cough. Stan can be petty, he thinks, viciously. He’s earned it.

“Will you hand me the flathead?” Ford asks.

Stan stretches without taking his eyes off Ford, pinches the flathead between thumb and forefinger, and tosses it on the table. Ford twitches at the loud noise and sends another disapproving look his way. Stan raises an eyebrow.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you,” Ford mutters.

“Nothing,” Stan says, raising his eyebrows higher.

“You can be as passive aggressive as you’d like,” Ford says. “It doesn’t bother me.”

Stan snorts and chews on the butt of his cigarette. “Ha,” he says. “Passive aggressive. That what I am?”

Sparks fly from his soldering gun. “That’s how you’re behaving.” He sets down the gun and sits back with a sigh. “You do realize this device will help us find Bill and take the fight to him, if he exists in our world? No – of course you don’t, because you’re getting yourself worked up over nothing.” Stan’s anger deflates. He lowers his head. “Stan, if you want to talk about Bill, talk about Bill. But,” he says, holding a hand up, “I’d appreciate it if you were honest when you do.”

Stan drops his cigarette and grinds it into the floor. He huffs out a breath and folds his arms across his chest. “I’m always honest,” he says. Ford rolls his eyes and turns back to the device. Stan grimaces and chews on his tongue. *Wow,* the Bill-voice in his mind says, chipper.

You're an idiot and *an asshole!* He pushes out of his chair and starts to pace around the room. "I mean…" He clears his throat. "Look, there's not a lot to say."

Ford doesn't look up, fiddling with the device. "I can't imagine why I haven't asked."

"There's not, alright?" Stan runs a hand through his hair, then snarls in frustration. "Look, how's about I just show you the cave, to start. Okay?"

That gets Ford's interest; he perks up and pushes the device away. "Is it far?" he asks.

"Kinda. C'mon."

He doesn't have to say it twice: Ford's like an overexcited puppy or something, snatching up a leather-bound journal and hurrying for the door. *He doesn't think he's dangerous,* Stan thinks, shrugging on a coat. *You'll have to tell him more. You'll have to tell him the truth.*

Or something adjacent to it.

Soon enough. For now, though, the forest waits for them, its dark boughs shivering in the autumn wind.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

This part contains non-penetrative noncon.

It takes Ford almost ten minutes of hiking to notice that Stan's brought a baseball bat. "Is that really necessary?" he asks.

"You ever hear about Lila McGee?"

Ford hesitates. "No."

"Because she didn't carry a bat," he says. (Lila McGee, Stan guesses, is probably watching Looney Tunes and chewing on her bunbun's ear. Not all of his lies are to protect himself.) "Look, I know your nerd brain is probably blowing up right now, but this shit is really dangerous. So keep on your toes and follow my lead, alright?"

He's surprised when he glances at Ford and finds him smiling warmly. Stan flushes, a light feeling filling his chest. "Searchers after horror haunt strange, far places," Ford says. "So… carry a big stick?"

"What is that, FDR?"

Ford barks out a laugh. "It's an amalgamation that should never have been," he says. "I guess."

Stan squints. "Almaga…?"

"A bad joke," Ford says. "Isn't it Bill who you're worried about? I don't know what a bat's going to do against him."

Stan works his jaw. His hand tightens on the bat. When he speaks, however, his voice is level. "You'd be surprised," he says.

Now, he thinks. *Just – start talking. He wants to hear it.* He takes a deep breath and slowly lets it out. "You, uh…get a chance to check out the house?"

He's not surprised that Ford's good humor evaporates, but it still stings. "Yes," he says, flatly.

"Looks pretty bad, huh?" Stan says.

"I can't say I'm surprised."

Don't swing the bat, don't swing the bat, don't swing the bat. "Thanks, Poindexter," he says. "Lovin' that vote of confidence."

"I attended a university where the majority of the attendants were either wannabe hippies or washed-up business majors. I'm more concerned about the animal fur than the drugs, Stanley."

Alright, they're getting off track. (He tries to imagine Stanford attending a college party held by either of the groups and fails, miserably.) "I mean the triangle shit," he says. Mostly.

Ford doesn't say anything. Stan's heart hammers in his chest. *Say something,* he thinks. *Anything.* But Ford remains quiet, waiting, presumably, for Stan to get on with it.

Stan sighs. "Ford, look, I…might have, uh, doctored the truth a tiny bit, when I first told you about Bill. The thing is – I made a deal with him. Well, a couple deals. That's why I'm so screwed now."

Ford stops and puts his hands in his pockets. His expression is unreadable, even to Stan. Somewhere high above them, birds sing and flutter through the trees. The wind whips Ford's coat against his thighs. "And what were the conditions of those deals?"

Stan rests the baseball bat on a shoulder. "The first one was for him to save my ass, in exchange for helping him out. The second one…" He sighs. "The second one was for money, for…being his friend."

(Stan is gone for several hours. When he comes to, a black German Shepherd is licking a cut on his arm, and he hurts more than he ever has, every bone aching. It's the middle of the night, and the moon is bright, nearly full. Stan's blood looks black in the washed-out light.

He sits, slowly. The dog starts to lick his face, and he winces, pushing it back. "Hello?" he says, into the quiet night.

The moon spins down, then speaks. "That went well!" Bill Cipher builds himself, a yellow so bright that it hurts Stan's eyes. "Don't you think?"

Stan can't answer that. He's shaking hard. The dog whimpers and lays down.

"Now that I've upheld my end of the deal, it's time you deliver on yours. Fair's fair, right? All I need from you is a plant." He waves his hand and a flower materializes in his hand with the leaves and petals inverted, so that buds grow on the stem and the leaves stretch elegantly upwards. "Take a good look, Bruiser. I just need you to find me a dozen or so of these, then draw a summoning circle – I'll show you the runes later – and burn them. Easy peasy, right?"

There is something wrong with Stan – maybe it's the blood loss, or maybe it's exhaustion, or something else entirely, but he is blank. The only thought he is able to process fully is that he wants Ford. Ford would understand what's happened. Ford would help him.

"Hey-hey-hey, Stanny-boy, the pipes aren't a-callin' for you, yet. Focus!" The flower hovers from Bill's hand to Stan. "I just saved your life – don't you think a few flowers are a fair

trade?”

Something blinks back on for Stan, dimly. He is alive. He’s *alive.* And now he is free. He lifts his head. “Yeah,” he says. “Okay.”)

Ford studies him. “What did his friendship entail?” he asks.

Stan sighs, turns, and starts walking again. “Chicken blood summoning circles,” he says. “Parties. And a whole lot of bullshit.”

“Sounds fun,” Ford says, just this side of sarcastic.

Say it, Stan thinks. *Just say the words.* But it isn’t as easy as that – go figure. Bill, for the vast majority of their time together, has been good. A total blast, if not someone Stan’s ever trusted an arm’s length away. To say that he hates Bill isn’t true. To say that it’s all on Bill isn’t, either; Stan is uncomfortably aware of his complicity in Bill’s crimes, knows that if he went back and had to do it all over again, he would probably make the same choices. Those choices, after all, kept him alive. Those choices brought Ford to him.

Stan clears his throat. “Y'know,” he says, “he doesn’t seem like it at first, but he’s actually pretty pathetic. I don’t know if he even really knows what he’s doing.” He glances at Ford. “He got super drunk in this lady’s body and just started crying. Like, full-on ugly crying. I don’t even know about what, ‘cause he started talking backwards.”

Ford doesn’t seem to know what to say to that. “He can get drunk?” he says, finally.

“Anyone can get drunk if they’re in a body,” Stan says. “Heck, dogs can get drunk.”

“So,” Ford says, with a little more force, “what is it that made you decide he’s dangerous?”

Stan grits his teeth. “Everything,” he says.

Ford sighs, but doesn’t press it; the words are still stuck in Stan’s throat, a physical block that makes him want to scream just to try and dislodge them. Instead, he sighs in return, and swings his bat from one shoulder to the other, and keeps walking in silence. Ford’ll understand soon enough. Now that the real thing is here, Bill won’t be able to resist fucking with Stanley – if, that is, Bill lives long enough, which Stan doesn’t plan on.

He can feel the cave before he can see it. It’s a familiar sensation by now, a prickling on the back of his neck, his fingers tingling like they’ve fallen asleep. Stan sighs and cuts to the right of an enclave created by two fallen trees. There it is, barely a cave at all, the entrance so low to the ground that they’ll have to crawl through. A layer of moss and mushrooms speckle the top. Stan knows from experience that the mushrooms will make you pass out and have intense lucid dreams – probably a side effect of Cipher. “Here we are,” he says, and gives the top of the cave a tap with the bat.

Ford whips out his journal and starts taking notes. “Really? In here?”

“It’s a lot bigger once you get inside,” Stan says. He pulls a flashlight out of his front pocket and flicks it on, then kneels with a grunt. “Here’s a tip: Go feet-first.” With that, he sticks his

feet into the cave entrance and slides in. It's not a long slope, but it still gets Stan's heart pumping as he slides his way down, fucking up his suit and his hands. He lands with an undignified *oof!* and promptly rolls out of the way. Ford follows, yelping when he hits the bottom. Stan brushes himself off and holds a hand out to Ford. "C'mon."

Of all the things Stan hates himself for, this one seems petty, but nonetheless he hates himself for the way his chest squeezes and his heart starts to pound when Ford clasps his hand. He hauls Ford to his feet and knocks dust off of him, then forces himself to let go. Ford lets out a soft laugh, more excited than amused, and turns on his own flashlight.

They don't have far to go to reach the drawings, but they go slow, Ford shining his light on every surface, taking it all in. Stan watches him out of the corner of his eye.

Ford spots the paintings before Stan does, and comes to an abrupt stop, his mouth falling open. "My god, Stanley, you didn't tell me the paintings were this ancient. These have to be – what, two thousand years old, at *least.*" He steps closer, slowly passing his light over the drawings. "You were able to read this?"

The prickling at the back of Stan's neck is getting stronger, pins and needles. "I mean, yeah," he says. "Pretty sure he doesn't care about pronunciation, Poindexter." He sets the tip of the bat on the ground and leans against it, studying Ford. A faint wind whispers through the cave; Stan shivers.

When it happens, it's too fast to stop. Stan is unfocused, watching Ford, and then he is *gone,* pinwheeling out of his body and into the Mindscape. Bill is used to Stan's body by now – he hardly even flinches, his shoulders slumping forward for just a second before resuming Stan's pose.

"No," Stan says. "No no no no – Cipher, you *piece of shit,* get out!" He lunges for his own body, his hands phasing through his head; he can *almost* feel the prick of Bill's sides, but he can't grasp them. "Bill, don't. Whatever you're doing, *don't.*"

Bill doesn't even dignify Stan with a glance. His expression remains neutral, his shoulders loose. "You know, Ford," he says, in such a good imitation of Stan's tone that Stan *screams.* "I've really…missed ya."

"*Don't you fucking touch him!*" Stan bellows, the sound echoing uselessly around him.

Ford glances back at Bill, but he's still only half-focused, his mind stuck on the drawings. He looks forward again and clears his throat. "I know," he says, his voice tight, uncomfortable. "I…did too."

Bill flicks his flashlight on and off, lazily. Then, he drops it, letting the light glow dully against the rocks, and walks toward Ford. It doesn't take more than a few steps for him to reach him – Stan darts between them, cursing Bill, threatening him with everything he can think of. But Bill looks at him, and smiles, and slowly, deliberately, slides a hand under Ford's arm, around his chest. He presses his nose into the back of Ford's neck.

Ford goes very still.

“I missed you so much, Sixer,” Bill whispers. His teeth scrape gently at the back of Ford’s neck. “Please…” He thumbs at one of the buttons on Ford’s shirt; Ford’s breath hitches.

“Stanley – no.” He bumps Bill with his shoulder and tries to edge away. Bill’s grip tightens. “Let go.”

It’s no use. Stan wedges himself between Bill and Ford, presses his hands into Bill’s eyes – that, at least, makes him glance up – and uses his last resort. “*Fine,*” he says. “I’ll make a deal, alright? Whatever you want. Just *stop.*”

Bill smiles.

For a second, Stan thinks it’s over. In that second, Stan is the same dumbass he was when he first summoned Bill.

“Wrong twin,” Bill says, quite clearly. Stan’s despair drops in him, as physical as anything can be in this form. He sinks, stunned.

Ford doesn’t react to the words; he is struggling more, squirming against Bill’s arm. “Stan, I’m serious,” he snaps. Bill mouths the side of Ford’s neck and hums under his breath. Ford is tense, unwilling to drop his flashlight or journal if he doesn’t have to. “Knock it off.”

Bill’s hand slides down Ford’s stomach, slowly, tugging each button of his shirt as he does. He kisses under Ford’s jaw. “C'mon,” he says, “I know you’ve missed this.”

“Enough!” Ford elbows Bill in the stomach and ducks away. His face is dark; he is tense and shivering slightly. “Stanley, look.” He tucks his journal in an inner pocket and runs a hand through his hair. “That was – we were children.”

Stan turns toward Ford, then swoops close. If he can just reach Ford, maybe – *maybe* – “Run,” he shouts, “run, Ford, listen to me, *run!*”

Of course, Ford can’t hear him. Ford backs further away from Bill, but the cave wall stops him short. He glances at it, then back to Bill, who is watching him with a cool expression. “You get that, right?” Ford says. “All teenagers experiment.” Bill swings the bat up to hold it in both hands and begins to walk toward Ford.

Stan can’t watch. He can’t. He darts away from them, and stops, his hands phasing uselessly through his ears.

“You don’t mean that,” Bill says. “Here. Let me just…” There is a brief sound of scuffling, Ford grunting – someone lands a punch, the weight of the strike echoing in the cave. Ford’s flashlight drops to the ground, its light pointing aimlessly at a far wall. A sudden noise of fear wrenches out of Ford, one so familiar it goes bone-deep. Stan has to turn. He can’t let Ford go through this alone.

Bill has Ford pressed against the wall with the bat across his chest, his hips flush against Ford’s, his face nestled in the crook of Ford’s neck. “I know what you want, Ford,” he murmurs.

Think, Stan, think. There has to be some way to get back; there has to be some way to stop this. There has to be something that Bill wants from him, still.

"I know you want this fat dick inside of you." Bill grinds his body against Ford's. "I know you're just as lonely as – I am."

Ford groans softly. His fingers scrape against the wall. "Stan?" he says, his voice small, nearly swallowed by the darkness.

The solution hits Stan like a freight train: *He can beat Bill at his own game.* No shit! He pivots and swoops over to Ford, ignoring Bill, praying to anyone that might be listening for this to work. He begins to chant under his breath, softly enough that Bill won't realize what's happening until it's too late. Stan is close enough that he can hear Ford's breath, quick and short. As the spell's magic begins to fill the air, Stan's hope fills him again, bright and feverish. A blue aura begins to shimmer around Ford.

"Wait, what?" Bill says, finally looking up.

"*Magister mentium,* sucker," Stan says. The cave is engulfed in blue light, and the light swallows Stan, dragging him down into the bottomless expanse of Ford's mind.

Chapter 7

“Wait, what?” Stan says, lifting his head. His grip on the bat relaxes, but Ford, who should by all rights use that to shove Stan away and run, is so thrown by the non sequitur that he doesn’t move. “Oh, *boy!* What an idiot! You don’t go when they’re *awake!*“

"What? Stan?” Ford doesn’t know where this is coming from, or *who* Stan is talking to – is Bill here, now? – but before he can question it further, his mind bursts with noise. *Not me not me not me not me, Bill Bill Bill Bill, not me not me,* compulsive thoughts that are and aren’t Ford’s, so loud that he spasms and gasps.

Stan bares his teeth and shoves the bat into Ford’s chest again, harder this time. The air slams out of Ford, and he gasps, struggling. The thoughts flicker faster in his mind, overtaking him: *Stan I can’t Bill Bill he’s here Bill help don’t touch him don’t let him not me not me what’s happening why can’t I –* “Wait,” Stan says, “*you don’t go in when they’re awake!* You *idiot!* You’re going to mess everything up! Fuck! How do I make you go to sleep? Fuck! You little insignificant *ignoramus!*”

Images flash in Ford’s mind, spiraling, things that he knows aren’t his, or thinks he knows, but they *are,* inexplicably: Running through a dark forest; a ghost screaming; a woman with blonde hair, laughing and moving in to kiss him; Ford, shirtless and leaning forward in the dark –

Stan drops the bat and wraps his hand around Ford’s throat. Slowly, he makes Ford kneel. It isn’t difficult; Ford is losing control of his body, shaking horribly, making soft noises that are almost words. He lays Ford on his back and straddles his stomach. “Ford,” he says, “Fordsy, baby, look at me. C'mon, smart guy. Look at me.”

Ford manages to obey, though his focus skitters over Stan’s face; he paws feebly at Stan’s hand, his breath coming in short gasps. Ford writhes, moaning. “What’s happening to me? Stan – Stanley – ”

Not me not me let me out not me Bill Bill run run RUN RUN

“Listen to me. This is Bill.” His hand tightens on Ford’s throat, cutting off more air; the edges of Ford’s vision begin to go fuzzy and dark. “Your idiot brother is in your head. I’m going to make you go to sleep and go get him out. Are you listening?”

“He – help me, Stanley, help – ”

“I’m Bill Cipher,” Stan repeats. He strokes Ford’s forehead and smooths back his hair. “Look at me, Ford. I’m Bill Cipher, and your brother is in your head, and I’m going to follow him in there and fix the damage he’s causing. Do you understand?”

“Please,” Ford chokes out, “help me – ”

“I am, Sixer,” Bill says, his voice gentle. “I am.”

His hand tightens, cutting off Ford's air.

RUN FORD RUN KILL HIM I'LL KILL HIM I'LL KILL HIM

Then – the bliss of silence.

*

When Ford passes out, his Mindscape coalesces into something concrete, and Stan slams into the ground. He just lies there for a minute, dazed, his thoughts spinning. Slowly, Stan touches his face, his chest. He sits. Memories reel through him; it's easier, now, to pick out which ones are his and which ones are Ford's – Stan never did go to college, and he doesn't recognize that shrimpy guy with the glasses, and he's almost positive he never had lunch at that Greek joint with Ma.

"That…coulda gone worse," Stan says. The hushed noise of waves on a beach brings him out of his own thoughts and into the present reality of Ford's mind. He's on a beach that stretches endlessly out from horizon to horizon. The Stan O' War is docked nearby, its sail open. A rickety lighthouse stands by it, spiraling up to the sky. Its light spins, slow and dignified. There is a staircase on the outside; Stan couldn't hope to count the doors lining it, each one a different size and shape, a few of them open. An alien sits halfway up the lighthouse, kicking its feet and glitching every few seconds. Piles of books are scattered down the beach, in lieu of rocks. Stan can hear laughter, faint, familiar, in the distance, and the creak of a swing.

"Whoa," he says. "You really outdid yourself, Ford."

A flash of light makes Stan wince. Bill appears, luminous, eye-searing, the only color in the world except Stan. "Boy, you really screwed yourself over on this one. Brava!" Confetti pops from his hands; it turns to ash and flutters to the ground.

Stan jumps to his feet, a bat with bright white sigils appearing in his hand. "Oh, you wanna *start* something, you've *got it started!*" He leaps for Bill, swinging with all his strength – which is considerable, here, where he can be anything he wants.

Bill phases out right before the bat connects and appears behind Stan. He catches Stan, one hand on his chest, one in his hair, and pulls him short. "I'm serious! I never thought you could take me fucking your brother and make it *worse,* but you did. It's impressive!"

Stan shifts into a black dog, small enough to drop out of Bill's arms; he lands as a human, rolling in the sand a moment before popping up to his feet. Bill flicks his hand lazily and a massive stone fist slams into Stan's back, sending him sprawling. Stan spits out sand. Before he can go on the offensive again, the hand slams into his back – again, again, stunning him with pain. *Shield, shield!* he thinks, and the fist comes down one more time with a thunderous ring.

"You should've seen him, Bruiser, it was great. He was practically crying! Boy, I sure hope you didn't damage him permanently with your little stunt. I need that brain!"

That makes the anger freeze in Stan; he lifts his head, which lifts the shield, and the fist above him. Bill floats a foot away, spinning his cane, pleased as anything. Ice begins to creep over the sand from Stan's hands. "What?" he says. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you know how it is when you go into a person's mind when they're awake! Oh – wait – *YOU DON'T.*" Bill expands on the last two words, blood red, veins popping in his eye. Stan flinches. Bill slams the fist down onto Stan's shield again, hard enough that Stan is crunched into the sand by his shield. "You don't know *anything* about the mind!" He begins to circle Stan, the fist lifting, finally. Stan lets his shield dissolve and rolls onto his back, watching Bill with growing horror. "Did you *ever* stop to consider there's a *reason* I go into people's dreams before doing anything else? Of course not!"

"What did I do?" Stan asks. "Is – is he going to be okay?"

Bill disappears in a flash. He reappears on Stan's chest, hardly any weight at all. His eye crinkles in pleasure. "You'd better hope he is, Knucklehead. See, the thing about the mind – when it's active, it's malleable." He knocks on Stan's forehead. "And if you don't know what you're doing, it's easy to break things! Meld into people…lose yourself…change them."

Stan sits up, picking up Bill in both hands and holding him. "No," he says, "no, how – how do I fix it?"

Bill shrugs. "Hard to say until we know what you did," he says. "Don't worry about it too much! I made sure to tell him I was following you in to fix the damage." He pats Stan's hand. "He knows exactly who did this to him."

Stan lowers his hands and stares at the lighthouse. Bill idly kicks his feet against Stan's stomach.

The Mindscape begins to tilt, and warp. Ford is waking. Bill glitches out of Stan's hands and reappears in front of his face. He tilts Stan's face up with a finger on his chin. "Aw, Bruiser, baby, don't let it get you down. I'm sure it'll be fine!" He cackles, spinning into the air, slow, slow, his arms thrown out. He's *reveling* in it. Stan could puke. "Have fun, Stanley!" he screeches, and, with a sound like a lightning strike, disappears.

Stan shuts his eyes. He imagines a trap door; it leads to a chute out of Ford's mind. Numbly, he opens it, takes a deep breath, and steps in.

He wonders, dully, what waits for him on the other side. He wonders if Ford will ever forgive him. He hopes not.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!